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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: MOSCOW SKINHEAD TRIALS PLACE RUSSIAN TOLERANCE IN  
LIMELIGHT

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Alice G. Wells  
for reason 1.4(d)

1. (C) Summary: The Moscow City Court sentence of 13 skinheads, including 12 minors, on September 22 for the murder of two people in 2007 served as a manifestation of Russia's growing struggle with racism and extremism. While press outlets reported a 50 percent decrease in hate crimes committed in Moscow in 2008 compared with the same period in 2007, one expert attributed the fall to a temporary Moscow government crackdown on local nationalists, noting that St. Petersburg crime numbers had not fallen. Putin called for ethnic equality in a meeting with nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, similar to Medvedev's appeal for tolerance in the wake of the Georgian conflict. However, xenophobic cries continued to reverberate with proposals for the establishment of ethnic ghettos, broadcasting restrictions, and fear of a Muslim population boom in Russia. End Summary.  
Skinhead Trials in Moscow  
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2. (SBU) The Moscow City Court sentenced one adult and 12 minor members of a Moscow band of skinheads to prison sentences ranging from three to nine years and she suspected they increased the crack-downs as a mere demonstration of power. Kozhevnikova maintained that the sentencing of the 13 skinheads on September 22 was not indicative of a broader government initiative to protect citizen's rights; rather, the Moscow City Court judge delivered the sentence, albeit "soft," because he personally believed in their punishment. In 2008, 71 people have been killed and 268 injured as a result of racist attacks in Russia. Despite the improvements in Moscow, comparative statistics from St. Petersburg from 2007-2008 indicated that the prevalence of hate crimes had not abated. Kozhevnikova told us that Moscow differed from St. Petersburg simply because the Moscow law enforcement agencies paid more attention to the issue. She estimated the current number of skinheads in Russia at a few tens of thousands.

4. (SBU) Human rights officials have criticized Russian authorities for downplaying racially-motivated hate crimes in recent years during the spate of skinhead violence. The main targets of violence continued to be people from Central Asia and the Caucasus, youth from alternate subcultures, and the gay and lesbian community. In many cases, officials have levied charges of hooliganism against skinheads under extremist legislation as opposed to utilizing existing hate crime legislation. Not coincidentally, extremist crimes in Russia increased from 150 to 250 during the first 8 months of 2008, almost a 70% increase over the same period in 2007. SOVA Center Director Aleksandr Verkhovsky attributed the increase to poor existing legislation, telling Interfax that current extremist laws simply harmed the system and needed serious change.

Extremism vs. Government Tolerance  
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15. (SBU) Despite the ongoing battle against extremist elements in Russia, recent statements from Russia's leadership indicated its awareness of the need for ethnicBV4QEQ Cederation Criminal Code concerning the incitement of ethnic hatred. Zhirinovsky argued that article 282, called the "the Russian article" for disproportionately punishing Russians "defending their homeland", served to "imprison ethnic Slavs" in their own country. After appealing to Zhirinovsky's patriotic character, Putin supported the appropriate use of article 282 and called for greater tolerance in Russia. Considering Medvedev's call for tolerance towards ethnic Georgians in the wake of the South Ossetian conflict, the Kremlin leadership has appeared cognizant of the need for internal interethnic stability.

16. (SBU) The Russian government, however, has continued to label as "extremist" or "racist" many societal elements and actions deemed adverse to Russian society. The television channel "2x2" became a target of scrutiny on September 8 after the Basman Interregional Prosecutor's Office for the city of Moscow warned the channel for broadcasting "violent" cartoons such as "South Park" and "The Simpsons," found to be insulting to "the honor of Christians and Muslims" and offensive to "religious believers regardless of their faith."

Subsequently, the General Prosecutor's Office issued a complaint to the Basman Prosecutor, demanding that it declare a certain South Park episode as extremist. SOVA Center issued a statement on September 9, noting that past complaints about South Park focused on the episode "Mr. Hankey's Christmas Classic," which did not merit the label "extremist." Interfax press reports on September 25, however, indicated that 2x2 might survive additional government scrutiny and continue to broadcast similar programming, in part thanks to public support from viewers.

#### Ethnic Ghettos: Protection from Skinheads?

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17. (C) One proposal for ethnic minority protection from skinheads involved the construction of ethnic ghettos. Nafigulla Ashirov, co-chairman of the Council of Russia's Muftis, originally suggested the creation of such residential districts in May 2008, an idea rejected by the Council of Muftis yet later supported by city authorities in the blue-collar southeastern administrative district of Moscow. Those officials announced their intention to establish formalized ethnic ghettos in July 2008. The announcement was met with large-scale uproar, not only from the ethnic communities designated for protection, but also from Russian nationalists and average citizens. Nationalists claimed that ethnic ghettos would serve as a breeding ground for non-Slavic activities, allowing ethnic diasporas to organize against the Russian state. On the other hand, ethnic communities despised the idea, fearing they would make easier targets for skinhead attacks once concentrated. Other Russian citizens saw the proposal as a spark for greater inter-ethnic tension.

18. (C) Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Geography analyst Olga Vendina told us on August 18 that the government's proposal for establishing ethnic ghettos lacked adequate support from the Moscow city administration and Muscovites alike, and she downplayed possibilities of its ultimate adoption. While acknowledging Moscow's need for cheap imported labor as an element of offsetting skyrocketing prices in Russia, she did not believe that the regional city administration could muster enough support for the project, especially considering the high price of new construction in Moscow. Levada Center Director for Social Research Alexei Levinson took a different approach to the issue, noting that unofficial ghettos already existed in Moscow, such as in the Vietnamese community. He doubted the need for official ethnic areas as new immigrants and temporary workers usually made rational, economic decisions when deciding on where to live -- choosing areas highly populated by their ethnic brethren.

¶9. (C) Levinson told us on September 23 that the rise of skinhead activity in Russia had been triggered by numerous factors, including the growing presence of Muslims and "gastarbeiters" in the largest cities. Moscow's attractiveness to "gastarbeiters", used to describe migrant workers from predominantly Muslim countries, aggravated many Russians' sense of internal security. Referring to Russia's infamous demographic crisis, Levinson noted that the high birth rate of Russia's Muslim population, in comparison to Russia's Slavic population, has started to worry some Russians. On September 18, Kremlin-supported Russia Today reported that the 2008 birth rate in Russia exceeded the 2007 rate by 8 percent. Levinson dismissed this reported increase as insignificant, however, estimating that the non-Slavic birth rate still vastly exceeded that of ethnically Slavic Russians.

¶10. (C) The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), a body operating under the Council of Europe, held a Moscow roundtable on September 23 to discuss methods for combating racism and intolerance. ECRI member Michael Head told participants that racial sentiments have been growing and public opinion of ethnic minorities had worsened in Russia, in part because Russia lacked a single strategy to combat extremism. Public Chamber member and Director of the Moscow Bureau of Human Rights Aleksandr Brod agreed with Head, telling us on September 25 that significant progress combating skinhead activity over the next five years remained doubtful. Kozhevnikova participated in the event and told us that the Commission made progress in combating extremism, specifically because of the high-level involvement of the law enforcement apparatus in discussions as well as joint efforts to refine the terminology associated with extremist activity.

Comment

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¶11. (C) Putin and Medvedev's calls for tolerance probably served to mollify moderate discriminatory behavior, but will not likely deter future hardcore racist or extremist behavior. Many experts cite the widespread belief that an innate Russian sense of Orthodox religious and ethnic superiority has influenced extremist mentality for centuries, and point to the most recent spate of skinhead violence as a new manifestation of an old problem.

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